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Four Themes in the Spirituality of St. John Gabriel Perboyre

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Canonizations are for us. Those heroic men and women whose holiness is "certified" already stand in the presence of God. The Church canonizes them in order to strengthen and encourage the rest of us who continue on our journey.

We have all known uncanonized saints. Our own Vincentian Family has seen thousands and thousands of them, I am sure. Is there anyone among us who has not known a heroic priest who labored tirelessly and sensitively in the service of the most abandoned, or a Daughter of Charity who brought the presence of God to the homes of the sick or who walked the corridors of a hospital bringing the Lord's peace to the dying. Among the uncanonized saints I list a Vincentian brother who shortly before he died talked with me about what the Kingdom of God would be like and who throughout his life witnessed to its joy. I think too of a Vincentian layman, a lawyer — wise, self-sacrificing, deeply in touch with God. In fact, I am happy to say that, among my brothers and sisters in our family, I have known a number of saints, some of whom are still alive.

But from time to time the Church canonizes saints, holding them up before us as models. It says to us: look carefully at this man, meditate on this woman, learn from them what it means to be holy.¹

So it is with John Gabriel Perboyre. On June 2, 1996, he was declared, officially, a saint. What does he teach us about living God's life?

Perhaps the most important things have already been said in this regard. In recent months several books and numerous articles have appeared describing Perboyre's years of faithful labor in the formation of priests, his yearning to serve as a missionary in China, his brief, difficult labors there, his sufferings during a year of imprisonment, and his painful death.

Here, I will try not to repeat what others have written. The purpose of this article is modest. It asks: What went on inside this genuinely holy man? How did he see God? How did he look at his mission? What was his attitude toward those around him? What shape did his prayer-life take? The article probes his letters² in an attempt to formulate a response, just as many have probed the events of his life and death in order to understand him more fully.³

Four themes, especially, stand out in his letters.

I. Devotion to providence

"I love the mystery of Providence very much."

Perboyre writes those words to Pierre Le Go.⁴ His letters make the depth of this love very clear. The mystery of providence, in fact, is a leitmotif that runs through them, a melody that plays in the background as Perboyre reflects on life's events. His accent on providence is particularly evident in three different settings.

First, God's providence takes the form of a journey-theme in many of Perboyre's letters: God walks with him, protecting him. He asks the Superior General, Dominique Salhorgne, to join with him and his companions in praising "the providence of the heavenly Father" for all the wonderful things that had happened during their trip from Le Havre to Jakarta.⁵ He writes similarly to others from Surabaya⁶ and from Macau.⁷ But Perboyre is quite concrete about providence. While attributing everything to God, he clearly recognizes that God works through secondary causes.⁸ He acknowledges therefore that the missionaries owed their safety not only to providence, but to the captain too! During his journeys on foot within China, he was utterly convinced that God was leading him step by step, but he was also grateful to his guides.⁹ Likewise, while he believed deeply that it was providence which had prepared the way for his whole missionary adventure in China, he also was grateful to his superiors¹⁰ for sending him.

Secondly, besides this journey-theme, providence has a further resonance in Perboyre's writings. He sees it as an "order," God's hidden plan. In this sense, like Vincent de Paul, he does not want to "run ahead of it."¹¹ He tells his brother Louis, just before the latter's departure for China, that God knows how to achieve his goals and how to obtain his greater glory and the sanctification of the elect.¹² Perboyre's letter is all the more poignant in that it was their last contact. Louis died on the way, never reaching the goal that he longed for in China. On hearing of his brother's death, John Gabriel writes to his parents: "The providence of God is very gentle, very admirable in regard to his servants, and infinitely more merciful than we can imagine."¹³ Years later he writes similarly from China to his cousin, describing the death of a young man to whom he was ministering. He meditates aloud on "the loving care of providence toward her elect, especially when it is a question of the passage to eternity."¹⁴

Thirdly, it is evident from Perboyre's letters that he sees suffering as a part of the mystery of God's provident love. He is convinced that "God chastises those whom he loves."¹⁵ He states that the life of the missionary is 50% suffering.¹⁶ He writes to the Superior General from China: "I do not know what is in store for me in the career that is opening up before me: without doubt, many crosses — that is the daily bread of the missionary. But what better can one hope for, when going to preach a crucified God?"¹⁷ This theme deepens as he begins to catch glimpses of the possibility of his own death.

The prospect of martyrdom is not uncommon in his letters. He views it serenely. He tells his father: "If we have to suffer martyrdom, it would be a great grace...."¹⁸ He writes to his cousin, "Our Lord always takes care of those who abandon everything for him. It is when they are the most abandoned of men, above all at the moment of death,

that he gives them more than the promised hundredfold."¹⁹ He yearns that his own heart might be united with the suffering hearts of Jesus and Mary.²⁰ Not long before his capture, writing to Jean Grappin, Assistant General in Paris, he muses about his own bad health and his future, concluding, "For the rest, I have no great concern about these matters. It is all up to providence!"²¹

Throughout his letters, especially as he speaks of providence, Perboyre's view of God is clear. He sees God as good, gentle, loving. The treasures of God's providence are "inexhaustible."²² He regards sufferings as "gifts from heaven."²³ In fact, he received many such gifts. His letters attest that he suffered almost continually from bad health in China. Upon his arrival there he was sick for three months and almost died. He often experienced great pain in walking.²⁴ The difficulties caused by his hernia is a frequent theme.

His final letter to his confreres attests to the sufferings he endured during his imprisonment. He was forced to kneel on chains while hanging by his thumbs and hair braid. Besides other tortures which he does not describe, he was struck 110 times. He says discreetly that his readers will find out many other details later, as they surely did when they heard the account of his painful death by strangulation.

II. His love for the mission

"How happy I am for such a wonderful vocation."

This is his exclamation as he announces to his uncle that he is being sent to China.²⁵ Perboyre's enthusiasm for the missions is evident quite early. It is clear that two missionaries who had gone before him were a source of deep inspiration for him: Francis Regis Clet and his own brother Louis.

He frequently mentions Clet. He says to Pierre Le Go: "Might I resemble to the end that venerable confrere whose long apostolic life was crowned with the glorious palm of martyrdom."²⁶ His letters from China speak of Clet with much admiration. He hopes that his cause of beatification will be promoted. He is eager to visit his burial place. He talks about Clet's long years of ministry, his difficulties in speaking Chinese, his sufferings, his death by strangulation on a cross.

There is a lovely letter written from Surabaya to his uncle in which he speaks about his brother:

I was not able to make this voyage to China without often thinking about my dear Louis. I loved to consider him walking before me, showing me the road that I should follow. Sad to say, like the star that guided the Magi, he disappeared in the midst of the journey. O what great joy I will experience when I see him once again shining with new brightness and showing me where Jesus, the Divine King, lies!²⁷

It is clear as early as February 1832²⁸ that John Gabriel was eager to take Louis' place as a missionary in China. His brother is often mentioned in his correspondence.

After his arrival on the mainland, Perboyre writes rather striking accounts of his new missionary activities. It is evident that he loved the Chinese people.²⁹ Today, moreover, when we emphasize inculturation so much, it is interesting to note the various ways in which he tried to adapt to Chinese life. First of all, he took on the grooming and the dress of the Chinese. "If you could only see me now," he writes almost laughingly to his brother Jacques, describing what a spectacle he is with his Chinese outfit, his shaved head, his long pigtail and mustache, and his eating with chopsticks. While surely some of this adaptation was motivated by the missionaries' need to disguise themselves (since the death penalty was meted out to Europeans who entered China illegally³⁰), it is also clear that Perboyre wanted to be "all things to all," as he explicitly tells Jacques.³¹ He insisted that the missionaries should adapt themselves to Chinese customs and spoke his mind when they did not.³² He worked hard too to learn the language; in fact, he felt that he did reasonably well with Chinese. He states that he liked studying it. He found the language rather fascinating, with its tones and its script. "For the Chinese," he wrote, "to read or to recite is to sing."³³

Perboyre was also convinced of the importance of forming lay Chinese missionaries, judging that they could have a very significant impact among their own people.³⁴ At Houpi he organized dialogue conferences. The methodology was simple. A week ahead of time the subject was announced; e.g., a virtue, or a duty. The following Sunday up to ten lay people preached on that subject. They were young students, catechists, or other "intelligent Christians." At the end, the priest gave some concluding remarks.³⁵

A typical mission lasted from eight to fifteen days. Missionary life must have been very busy since, not long before his capture, Perboyre tells Monsieur Aladel, the Assistant General in Paris, that he had given 17 such missions between the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Pentecost. He speaks with great enthusiasm about the first mission in which he preached in Chinese. A native-born confrere, Jean Pe, accompanied him. Perboyre describes Pe with considerable admiration, saying that he bore the burden of the heavy preaching and that he had wonderful pastoral skills.³⁶

A mission ordinarily proceeded along these lines. When the missionaries arrived in a community they compiled an exact list of all the Christians "adults and children, good and bad."³⁷ They then had the Christians recite the catechism publicly beginning with the children and proceeding on to the aged. Perboyre notes that the people did this without embarrassment and that parents did not hesitate to allow themselves to be helped, when they faltered, by their children. Then there were baptisms, confessions, first communions, confirmations, marriages, and admission into various confraternities. Generally, the missionaries stayed right in the homes of the people. They ate what the people ate, usually rice.³⁸

Perboyre remarks that there were sometimes huge numbers of confessions. He declares, in fact, that most Chinese Christians loved to go to confession frequently.³⁹

He states that the life of the missionaries in China was "completely apostolic,"⁴⁰ filled with difficulties and dangers. They spent three-quarters of the year roaming from village to village, preaching, catechizing, offering the sacraments, living frugally in a land where most of the Christians themselves were poor.⁴¹

III. Love for the community

*"I would give a thousand lives for it."*⁴²

The letters make it clear how attached to the Company Perboyre was. He recalls to his cousin Gabriel how much gratitude they both owe the Congregation for all that it had given them.⁴³

One of the most frequently recurring themes in his letters is how much God is blessing the Little Company. He sees in the goodness of the novices a sign of God's plans for the Company in the future.⁴⁴ He is eager to see others become sons of St. Vincent.⁴⁵ He is convinced that St. Vincent continues to attract God's blessings on the Congregation.⁴⁶

His letters show warmth toward friends within the Community,⁴⁷ as well as a willingness to criticize, in simplicity, what he saw as wrong in the Congregation.⁴⁸ The latter trait got him into some trouble with his superior, Jean-Baptiste Torrette, who was his classmate from the seminary. John Gabriel takes pains to apologize to Torrette, who had written him a rather sharp letter of rebuke. While Perboyre's letter is apologetic, it also gives little ground. He feels that the missionaries in mainland China were misunderstood and that it would be helpful if both at Macau and in Paris there were someone who had some real experience on the mainland. In this, I suspect, he echoed the sentiments of many a missionary!

Even with these misunderstandings, however, he delights in the unity of the missionaries. He tells his cousin Monsieur Caviolle that, though they come from different nations, they work in great harmony, "united by the bonds of the same spirit, at the same time zealous and tireless in carrying on the same works and bearing the same cross."⁴⁹

IV. Devotion to the blessed virgin mary

"The whole world is filled with the mercy of Mary."⁵⁰

In the letter in which he announces to his uncle the good news of his being sent to China, he adds that his superiors told him his assignment on the Feast of the Purification, which led him to believe that he owed much, in this matter, to the Blessed Virgin.⁵¹ In the later years of his life, his love for Mary took on the form of devotion to the Miraculous Medal.

A reading of Perboyre's letters makes it evident that he and others brought the medal to China very soon after the apparitions in Paris and, through it, fostered devotion to Mary.⁵² John Gabriel knew Fr. Aladel, St. Catherine LabourJ's spiritual director, quite well. He writes to him in 1838, recounting with enthusiasm the effects that the medal is having in China.⁵³

Already in 1833, while still in Paris, he had written to his uncle: "The medal of which I have spoken with you is the one that in 1830 was revealed by the Blessed Virgin to a seminarist of the Sisters of Charity."⁵⁴ He promises to send his uncle some of the medals, saying that thousands have been distributed in France and in Belgium and that numerous miracles, healings, and conversions have been worked. His letters to his brother Antoine and to his uncle over the following two years make frequent references to the medals and to miracles. He often encloses medals for others to distribute and promises to send them a printed account of the miracles.⁵⁵

From Jakarta he writes to the Superior General, Fr. Salhorgne, that during a fierce storm that had taken place during their journey, when the waves were like mountains, the missionaries prayed: "O Mary, conceived without sin." He adds that no sooner had they raised their hands toward the Star of the Sea than the tempest subsided.⁵⁶

In China he was an eager distributor of the Miraculous Medal.⁵⁷ In a letter written shortly before his capture⁵⁸ he tells of a young woman who had been brought to him from one of the Christian communities and who had been afflicted by a mental disorder for eight months. The people told him that she was anxious to go to confession. Though he doubted the usefulness of hearing her confession, he did so out of compassion. In parting, he gave her a Miraculous Medal. From that day on she began to be healed. Within four or five days she was completely changed.

A final thought

It is surely not by chance that these four themes are so prominent in Perboyre's surviving letters. They are all important elements in the tradition that he received as a member of the Vincentian Family and which he handed on to others both as seminary director in France and as a missionary in China. All of the themes are found in the rules⁵⁹ that St. Vincent gave to his priests and brothers as well as in the contemporary Constitutions of the Vincentians.⁶⁰

Devotion to providence is, at root, belief in the attentive presence of a personal God who walks with us in the dramatically varied experiences of human existence: light and darkness, grace and sin, plan and disruption, peace and turmoil, health and sickness, life and death.

Love for the mission lies at the heart of the Vincentian experience: a deep yearning to follow Christ, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, in reaching out effectively to the most abandoned: ministering to them "spiritually and corporally,"⁶¹ "in word and in work."⁶²

Love for the Community shows itself, basically, in fidelity to our commitments and in our living and working with one another "as friends who love one another deeply."⁶³ One of its clearest expressions is a spirit of thanksgiving for all that God has given us in and through the Company, thus avoiding the perennial temptation to ingratitude, "the crime of crimes," as St. Vincent calls it.⁶⁴

Devotion to Mary expresses itself today in a wide variety of ways — the celebration of her feasts, the rosary, the Miraculous Medal — but especially, as St. Vincent urged, in our being united with her as listeners to the word of God. "Better than anyone else," Vincent states, "she penetrated its substance and showed how it should be lived."⁶⁵

If canonizations are for us, then surely these four themes, so striking in the letters of John Gabriel Perboyre, offer us much to reflect on.

Notes

¹Apostolic Constitution, *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*, introduction.

²Let me thank Fr. Emeric Amyot d'Inville, Sr. Ann Mary Dougherty, Sr. Alicia MuZoz, and Mrs. Anna Carletti, who helped me analyze the themes in Perboyre's letters. Without their assistance this article would not have been written.

³A total of 102 letters were annotated and published by Joseph Van Den Brandt in a very limited edition at Beijing in 1940.

⁴*Letters*, p. 119.

⁵*Letters*, p. 101.

⁶*Letters*, p. 107.

⁷*Letters*, p. 116.

⁸*Letters*, p. 116.

⁹*Letters*, p. 172.

¹⁰*Letters*, p. 211.

¹¹*Letters*, p. 23.

¹²*Letters*, p. 41.

¹³*Letters*, p. 53.

¹⁴*Letters*, p. 258.

¹⁵*Letters*, p. 61.

¹⁶*Letters*, p. 98.

¹⁷*Letters*, p. 141.

¹⁸*Letters*, p. 214.

¹⁹*Letters*, p. 259.

²⁰*Letters*, p. 260.

²¹*Letters*, p. 284.

²²*Letters*, p. 211.

²³*Letters*, p. 61.

²⁴*Letters*, p. 185.

²⁵*Letters*, p. 95.

²⁶*Letters*, p. 119.

²⁷*Letters*, p. 110.

²⁸*Letters*, pp. 54-55.

²⁹*Letters*, p. 138; also, p. 150.

³⁰*Letters*, pp. 171-172.

³¹*Letters*, p. 145.

³²*Letters*, pp. 203-204.

³³*Letters*, p. 223.

³⁴*Letters*, p. 175.

³⁵*Letters*, pp. 255-256.

³⁶*Letters*, pp. 217-218.

³⁷*Letters*, p. 237.

³⁸*Letters*, p. 225.

³⁹*Letters*, p. 282.

⁴⁰*Letters*, p. 224.

⁴¹*Letters*, pp. 224-225; cf. p. 175.

⁴²*Letters*, p. 123.

⁴³*Letters*, p. 73.

⁴⁴*Letters*, p. 81; also, pp. 88-89.

⁴⁵*Letters*, p. 23.

⁴⁶*Letters*, p. 81.

⁴⁷Cf. *Letters*, pp. 127, 133, 155, 209, 230, 241.

⁴⁸*Letters*, p. 269.

⁴⁹*Letters*, p. 254.

⁵⁰*Letters*, p. 281.

⁵¹*Letters*, p. 95.

⁵²When I visited continental China several years ago I was surprised that, almost fifty years after the Communist takeover, so many visible signs of devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal remained. It is now clear to me, from reading Perboyre, how quickly the medal got there and how rapidly it spread.

⁵³*Letters*, p. 281.

⁵⁴*Letters*, p. 69.

⁵⁵*Letters*, pp. 76, 79, 83, 85, 89, and 94.

⁵⁶*Letters*, p. 100.

⁵⁷*Letters*, pp. 165, 198.

⁵⁸*Letters*, p. 281.

⁵⁹*Common Rules* II, 3; I, 1 and XI, 10; VIII, 1-2; X, 4.

⁶⁰*Constitutions* 6, 10, 19-25, 49.

⁶¹SV IX, 59; IX, 593; XI, 364; XI, 592.

⁶²SV XII, 87.

⁶³*Common Rules*, VIII, 2.

⁶⁴SV III, 37.

⁶⁵SV XII, 129.